

Roe Serves as an Expert Witness in the Committee on Education & Labor Hearing

Strengthening America's Competitiveness Through High School Reform

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Congressman Phil Roe (TN-1) served as an expert witness in the Committee on Education and Labor hearing entitled "Strengthening America's Competitiveness through High School Reform." Congressman Roe testified about the importance of adult education programs and vocational education, which are two important pillars in the debate over the future of high school education.

As a former Mayor of Johnson City, Roe worked at the local level to ensure these programs were available and shared his experiences with the Committee. This hearing will provide Members with information about challenges faced by the nation's secondary schools, including the dropout crisis.

HEARING BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to data collected and compiled in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 4 percent of students dropped out of high school, over 87 percent of students completed high school, and over 74 percent of freshmen graduated from high school in four years (commonly referred to as the Average Freshman Graduation Rate). However, independent studies have made the point that the official estimates of State dropout rates are too low, completion rates are too high, graduation rates are inaccurate, and that additional efforts should be undertaken to examine ways to obtain better measurements. These independent researchers, according to a report put out by Editorial Projects in Education, estimate that three in ten students fail to finish high school with a diploma and barely half of historically disadvantaged minority students graduate.

The definition of a dropout varies widely from State to State, district to district and even between schools within districts. For example, some districts may not include students who drop out over the summer, or who leave school to get married while other districts do include these students in the dropout total. Other variations may include whether or not certain types of non-traditional students (i.e., those who leave regular high school before graduation to enter correctional institutions, enroll in GED programs, or enter college) are counted as dropouts until they have completed an equivalency program. In addition, some districts may keep more complete records than others. As such, there are a number of indicators that exist to compile a nationwide dropout rate as well as the related or corresponding completion rate and graduation rate and each differ depending on State estimates provided by the U.S. Department of Education as well as the rates supplied by States under the reporting requirements of NCLB.

ROE'S TESTIMONY

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am very pleased to be able to testify about the importance of high school education. I was just down in Nashville this past weekend to see my son graduate from Vanderbilt's MBA school. Our economy is still struggling but after interacting with the graduates, you get a sense that things will turn around. And that's the most important reward we get out of investing in education – hope for a better future for our country.

I grew up in Clarksville, Tennessee and went to school in a one-room schoolhouse with no running water, but I had committed parents who encouraged me to continue my education. I was fortunate enough and worked just hard enough to graduate from college and from medical school. Receiving my degrees has allowed me to live a good life, so I never forget to remind our youth about the importance of education.

When I speak to students, I always ask them, "Would you like to know how you can earn an extra \$250,000 in your lifetime?" I can see on their faces, they're thinking, "Well, that sounds pretty good to me." So, I tell them, "Just graduate from high school." I also ask them, "Would you like to know how you can earn an extra \$1 million?" "Just graduate from college." The fact is, continuing your education dramatically improves your chances at having financial success. While there's a short-term cost for some of these kids, the investment pays off in the long-term.

In Tennessee, it's particularly important for us to remind our teenagers about the financial impact an education can have on your life. Our high school graduation rate for the 2004-2005 school year was 68.5 percent, and that's improved nearly 10 percent over the past five years, but we are still below the national average. We still have too many who are dropping out — some because of apathy, some because they simply need to help pay the bills and put food on the table.

Having been a stubborn teenager myself, I know you can't convince everyone to stay in school. So while I'm sure we will rightly focus attention on fostering excellence in our high schools and ensuring that fewer kids drop out, I also want to remind the Committee not to forget about those people who have already dropped out. I believe we should look at adult education programs as an effective and necessary complement to the drop out problem. I'm absolutely convinced that you have to offer adult education programs that encourage young adults who have already left the system to return to get their degree.

Last week, the Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness heard testimony from country music star Gretchen Wilson about her experience with adult education. Ms. Wilson went back to school to receive her GED both for herself and to set an example for her child. Her reasons for going back and her experience with the programs speak to the incredible importance they serve in our overall education policy. Programs like those offered to Ms. Wilson help us reach out to kids and adults who have slipped through the cracks and offer them an opportunity to move forward not only with their education but with their careers.

Even better, these programs are one of the most cost effective solutions I know of. In Tennessee, 14,662 individuals earned their GED, and it only cost \$275 per student to make this happen. This resulted in over \$134 million in additional taxable income to the state because each individual was making over \$9,000 per year more.

By supporting the adult education programs in conjunction with improving our high schools, I think we'll find that our education system has far more successes than we give it credit for and can have a much broader reach on impacting our next generation's lives.

Similarly, I think we've seen a decline in career education and I would encourage the Committee to look at the role that the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education program plays in reducing the dropout rate. Some students are at high risk of not finishing school because they don't think that school has any relevance for them. They want a job and a pay-check right away, and a career-focused education can help them achieve this goal and make sure they get their high school diploma. The programs offered through the Perkins Act allow kids who may have disengaged from "regular" high school programs to remain engaged through career focused programs.

Finally, I would note that as a former Mayor, I have seen first-hand federal programs work best when decision-making authority is left in local officials' hands. Typically, they are the most qualified to fix problems that arise in their jurisdiction because they know the circumstances surrounding problems.

So as the Committee examines how to improve high schools, I hope we consider allowing true local flexibility rather than trying to impose broad federal mandates on our high schools.

I think this topic is particularly timely with our present economic situation. Only with an educated workforce will we be able to compete in an increasingly global marketplace, and I thank the committee for holding this hearing and allowing me to testify.